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AUTHOR Rothschild, Jeffrey
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ABSTRACT

In writing, as with tools, form must always follow function. From this perspective there can be no "good" writing, only effective writing. Unfortunately, in most instructional situations the function of communicating to an audience is often neglected. Most so-called poor writing falls into the category of writer-based prose. Once student writing is viewed as such rather than as a set of seemingly random or mindless errors, it is easier to understand the problems students encounter in the writing process. What may seem to be unclear sentences or poor writing may in fact be very clear and understandable to the writer. Other structures may communicate effectively in speech but not in writing, where the intonation patterns are different. These kinds of errors do not contradict rules of "good writing" but they do interfere with communication, and that interference can only be evaluated with regard to who the intended reader is. This kind of evaluation is a much more pragmatic method by which to demonstrate to students why certain passages of their compositions succeed at communicating while others fail, without fostering writing anxiety or insecurity that comes from constant use of value judgments. (HTH)

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WRITING OUR WRONGS

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Jeffrey Rothschild
Instructor of Composition

Passaic County Community College
College Boulevard
Paterson, New Jersey 07505
(201) 279-5000 ext. 375

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In November of 1972, the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication passed a resolution known as "The Students' Right to Their Own Language", a resolution which affirmed the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language." The fact that an organization as prestigious as the Conference on College Composition and Communication could pass such a resolution was a reflection of the general outlook that had come to prevail in higher education during the late sixties and early seventies.

By 1976, however, the situation had dramatically reversed itself. "Back-to-basics" was now the burning issue of the day. According to a 1978 article published in Today's Education:

> At the end of 1976, 16 states had taken either legislative or state board action to ensure that minimal competency standards of some type were introduced into the public schools. By the end of 1977, the number had increased to 31.

Fueled by an overall decline in SAT scores, a development widely reported upon in a variety of popular magazines such as Time and Newsweek in 1977, "back-to-basics" remains today one of the major concerns in education. In the area of college composition, this concern has manifested itself in a renewed emphasis on the teaching of basic grammar skills and correct usage, in a renewed emphasis upon "good writing".

While few of us would condone illiteracy, I would nevertheless like to begin with the seemingly foolhardy statement that this renewed emphasis upon correct usage and good writing is a profound mistake since there is no such thing as good writing.

Obviously, an opening statement as provoking as this one needs explanation, but allow me to indulge myself for a moment before providing such an explanation.

Imagine, if you will, that you are visiting the home of a friend who has recently decided to take up woodworking as a hobby, but who has had little experience with tools. Shortly after you arrive, he hands you a screwdriver made by the Stanley Company, their top-of-the-line model, guaranteed for life, and says quite innocently, "I just bought this and don't know much about tools. Is it a good tool?" You examine the screwdriver, having had some experience in such matters, and then reply with equal innocence, "Certainly, the best." Your friend nods and then points to a wooden board in the corner with a large, heavy nail protruding from its center. Handing you the screwdriver, he says: "Could you do me a favor and put that nail through the board, I don't seem to be able to do it." Astonished at such naivete, you turn to your friend and exclaim, "But you can't drive a nail through that board with a screwdriver; that's not what it's used for! You need a hammer." To which your friend replies even more astonished, "But you said it was a good tool."

Although it would certainly be reasonable at this point to suggest that your friend take up stamp-collecting, his statement was actually equally as reasonable. By calling the screwdriver he gave you "a good tool", you were clearly implying that the quality of "excellence" or "goodness" in a tool exists without any relationship to function. Thus, being somewhat literal-minded, your friend could justifiably respond as he did.

Had you considered his initial question more carefully, you might have realized that there can be no such thing as a "good" tool apart from function. At best, you might have spoken of a "well-made" tool. But, of course, this avoids the issue at hand. If your aim is to hammer in a thousand nails, you would clearly rather have a poorly-made hammer than the best-made screwdriver. Ultimately then, in dealing with any kind of tool, it is meaningless to speak of form without regard to function; practically speaking, form must always follow function.

In terms of screwdrivers and hammers, we can easily accept the idea of form following function. In terms of writing, however, this idea is not nearly as acceptable. Is not writing though, at least on the level with which we deal with it, also a kind of tool? Admittedly, when raised to the level of an art, as in great poetry or fiction, writing may be much more than just a tool, and we may reasonably speak of well-constructed novels or beautifully-made poems. But in the context of academic or scholarly writing, in the context of a composition course, are we not using writing primarily as a tool rather than as an end in itself?

Once we accept the idea that writing, for our purposes, is a kind of tool, then logically we must also accept that with writing, as with screwdrivers and hammers, form must always follow function. The question, however, is what is the function of writing?

In the broadest sense, the function of virtually all writing can be seen as communication, whether of information, an idea, an image, or request, etc.

On this basis, we may construct a model of writing borrowed from information theory which becomes quite instructive. According to information theory, four essential elements must exist for communication to take place; a transmitter, a receiver, a message, and a channel through which to transmit the message. In the context of writing, the transmitter is obviously the writer; the receiver is the reader; the channel is the writing or written words; and the message is whatever content is being transmitted to the reader through those words. Unless all four of these elements are present, the communication process in writing will break down.

In the typical instructional situation, three of these four elements are commonly acknowledged (i.e. the writer, the writing, and the message). The fourth element though--the reader or receiver--is often just as commonly neglected. However, since the function of writing is to communicate to a reader, and since form as we have seen has no meaning apart from function, it is to the reader of readers that the writer must direct everything in a piece of writing. That is, it is only in terms of the reader or audience that a writer can determine at each point what form the composition will take.

From this perspective, there is obviously no such thing as "good writing" which exists in a vacuum; there is only effective writing or writing which succeeds in communicating the writer's message, whatever it may be, to the reader. From this perspective, writing instruction becomes not a question of getting students to attain mechanical correctness, but of getting them to learn strategies for communicating effectively in the written mode.

The problem with student writing, with the writing of any so-called poor writer, is that it rarely demonstrates an awareness of the reader or audience on the writer's part and thus seldom communicates effectively. The writing produced by such writers generally becomes what Linda Flower, of Carnegie-Mellon University, has called "writer-based prose".

In her article, "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing" (College English/September 1979), Flower defines writer-based prose as "a verbal expression written by a writer to himself and for himself." Such writing becomes, as Flower explains, "simply a record of the workings of the writer's own verbal though." While writer-based prose may have a great deal of validity for the writer himself, it will usually fail to communicate effectively to a reader.

Effective written communication to a reader, however, unlike writing produced solely for the writer's own sake, demands that the writer produce complex structures: that he collects data and details and then organizes them to support specific ideas, that he orders these ideas into an integrated pattern. But this is a difficult cognitive task which most students will be incapable of successfully accomplishing on their own. Thus, they will seldom succeed in progressing beyond writer-based prose to what Flower has termed "reader-based prose", prose in which everything is directed towards the reader.

Although writer-based prose is not structured for a reader, it nevertheless does not possess a certain logic of its own. According to Flower, "it represents a practical strategy for dealing with information", for economically retrieving and then

organizing the information stored in the brain. In a fascinating passage in the above mentioned article, Flower cites a study by Linde and Labov in which one hundred New Yorkers were asked to tell an interviewer the layout of their apartments. Ninety-seven percent of those questioned responded with a tour structure. That is: "You walk in the front door. There is a narrow hallway. To the left, "etc. Only three percent resonded to the question with an overview of the apartment which was then progressively filled in with details, such as: "I'd say it's laid out in a huge square pattern, broken down into four units." Apparently, the survey or tour strategy was used by the vast majority of the people questioned because it reflects the very structure of human memory, of the way information is processed and stored in the brain.

The structure of writer-based prose also seems to reflect this mental framework. As Flower notes, writers who compose writer-based prose structure information in two distinctive ways: "as a narrative of their own discovery process or as a survey of the data before them." While more advanced writers often employ such strategies in first drafts as well, particularly when they are attempting to cope with "complicated information which is not yet fully comprehended", such writers always proceed to transform these first drafts into prose which is structured for a reader. The inexperienced writer, however, being unaware of the importance of this transformation process, assumes that the reader will somehow do the work of making sense out of what has been written and is content to remain with the structure of writer-based prose.

Once student writing is viewed as "writer-based prose", as the result of a functional system for processing information in a difficult cognitive situation rather than as a set of seemingly random or mindless errors, we are suddenly provided with a powerful theoretical perspective for understanding the problems that students encounter in the writing process. Consider, for a moment, some of the more frequent aspects of student writing that we commonly assume to be mere stylistic infelicities. Every instructor, for example, has received papers having pronouns without referents, such as the vague use of "it" in the following sentence (cited by Flower from Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations):

> With all the jobs available, he will have to know more of it because there is a great demand for it.

Although many of us would simply call this sentence "bad English," it may in fact reflect a complex cognitive process that is taking place in the writer's mind. As Flower explains:

> For the writer of the above sentence, the pronoun was probably not ambiguous at all; "it" no doubt referred to the psychological subject of his sentence. Psychologically, the subject of an utterance is the old information, the object you are looking at, the idea on which your attention has been focused. The predicate is the new information you are adding. This means that the psychological subject and grammatical subject of a sentence may not be the same at all. In our example, "college knowledge" was the writer's psychological subject--the topic he had been thinking about. The sentence itself is simply a psychological predicate. The pronoun "it" refers quite reasonably to the unstated but obvious subject in the writer's mind.

A similar process is probably at work in the use of vague or nebulous expressions which mean little or nothing to a reader. Flower cites the following example:

> By having these two jobs, I was able to see the business in an entirely different perspective.

What is conveyed to a reader here is only a vague or general concept. That is, the writer has shifted the essential cognitive task onto the reader by forcing him to make connections here and to draw a conclusion about the significance of the phrase "an entirely different perspective." For the writer, though, this phrase may represent "a large body of facts, experiences, or ideas" which has merely been turned into a "code" word or phrase. In fact, when asked to clarify what she meant by this sentence, the writer rewrote it in the following way:

> By having these two jobs, I was able to see the true relationship and relative importance of the various departments in the company. I could see their mutual dependence and how an event in one part of the firm can have an important effect on another.

Might this example not explain the experience we have all had of questioning a student about a seemingly meaningless passage in his paper only to receive a completely lucid explanation of what he meant? To our exclamation of "well, why didn't you write that?", the student might reasonably respond, "Because I hadn't thought it when I wrote the passage." The process described above undoubtedly also holds true for the use of such words as "nice, beautiful, and good", words which convey little to a reader but which on a deeper level probably signify a whole complex of feelings or thoughts to the writer.

Sentence fragments are another common occurrence in student writing which rather than being mere mechanical mistakes, may be a reflection of the very thought processes of the student. Take the following sentence cited by Flower from Maxine Hairston's A Contemporary Rhetoric:

> Young people need to be on their own. To show their parents that they are reliable.

For the writer, the fragment here is probably a completely new predicate intended to modify the entire preceeding psychological subject of "Young people need to be on their own," rather than the mere grammatical subject of "young people." While such a structure may communicate effectively in speech, in writing it is disastrous since it sets up an intonation pattern or expectation in the reader that is not fulfilled. That is, the reader anticipates a pause after the noun "reliable" to be followed by another clause, for example, "To show their parents that they are reliable, young people must get their own jobs." When the reader does not find another clause, but instead encounters a period, he must go back and reinterpret the sentence until he realizes that the fragment is actually a modifying clause that refers backwards rather than the introductory clause he expected.

The common thread running through all these errors is not that they contradict various inherent rules of "good writing", but that they interfere with the communication of the writer's meaning to the reader. In terms of information theory, these "errors" are what can be called "noise". Noise is defined as anything that interferes with the transmission of information. In each of the examples given, the error can in fact only be defined as an

error because it interferes with communication, with the transmission of the writer's message. Of course, on this basis, we must accept that there is no such thing as an abstract "error", just as there is no such thing as "good writing". More importantly, we can determine whether communication has been interfered with only on the basis of who is being communicated to, of who the reader is.

The approach to writing outlined above is so vastly different than the traditional ones that it is perhaps better to avoid even calling such occurences "errors". In a special program of writing instruction at California State University at Sacramento, such "errors" have been termed "miscues", and a student's progress is determined by the progressive diminishing of such miscues in his or her writing. In their article, "The Integrating Perspective: An Audience - Response Model for Writing" (College English/November 1979), Ruth Mitchell and Mary Taylor define a miscue "as an error which interferes with the transmission of meaning". As they explain:

> Such errors cut across traditional categories: a misspelling, a misplaced sentence emphasis, a botched paragraph, a beginning which promises something the development does not deliver -- all can interfere with meaning. But if they do not interfere, they are not miscues. Used to guide teaching, miscue analysis firmly connects a writer's performance with an audience.

According to this approach, we can only evaluate the success of a piece of writing in terms of how effectively it transmits the writer's intended message. Moreover, the means by which any given message may be effectively transmitted will often differ drastically according to the particular message being transmitted. The techniques that will work effectively in the communication of abstract ideas will certainly differ from those that will work to communicate physical images.

The evaluation of student writing in terms of "miscues" suddenly provides us with a pragmatic method by which to demonstrate to students why certain passages of their compositions succeed and others do not. The evaluation of writing is no longer based upon abstract rules of right and wrong, but upon identifiable psychological and linguistic principles of communication.

In the hands of a skilled instructor and willing student, this approach to writing provides students with practical feedback about why their compositions fail to communicate effectively to the particular audience they are writing for and how to rewrite their compositions so that they become more effective pieces of written communication. With such feedback, we can create an instructional situation that does not foster writing anxiety and linguistic insecurity through the constant use of value judgements such as "this is poor writing", "your grammar is bad", or "your sentences are dull."

Although it is popularly believed that both student writing and writing instruction have deteriorated over the past fifteen years, we are in fact on the verge of a real breakthrough in the

teaching of writing. The implications of the above approach and its potential applications to the instructional situation are indeed far-reaching. As we learn more about the factors that are involved in the interaction between writer and audience and about the factors that govern audience response, both specific audiences and audiences in general, the applications of this approach will undoubtedly become even more far-reaching. Already, research in cognitive psychology has provided invaluable data about how sentences are processed, how information is stored and retrieved, how sentences interact with one another; and additional data is constantly being provided. Research in composition itself, in linguistics, sociolinguistics, neuropsychology, information theory, and numerous other diverse fields is providing equally invaluable data.

Perhaps the only thing preventing a truly far-reaching breakthrough from occuring in the teaching of writing is the absence of generalists capable of pulling together the research from these diverse, specialized fields. The increasing specialization in our fields of endeavor has allowed us to make vast strides in the accumulation of knowledge. At the same time, however, we have neglected to develop the generalists who would supply the connections that are needed for us to take full advantage of this accumulated knowledge.

We must first of all recognize the need for such generalists, and then we must find ways of developing and supporting them. In this lies our hope for the future if we are truly concerned with literacy and not just with a simplistic "return to basics."